

Ficus microcarpa L.f.



Common Name: Laurel fig, Indian laurel, laurel rubber

Synonymy: *F. nitida* Thunb. and *F. retusa* L. misapplied

Origin: India, Malaysia

Botanical Description: Evergreen tree to 15 m (50 ft) or more in height, with a rounded dense crown, smooth gray bark, milky sap, and long, thin, dangling aerial roots. Leaves alternate, simple, leathery, deep glossy green, oval-elliptic to diamond-shaped, to 13 cm (5 in) long, with short, pointed, ridged tips. Flowers tiny, unisexual, numerous, hidden within the “fig”, a fleshy, specialized receptacle that develops into a multiple fruit (syconium), this green turning to yellow or dark red when ripe, sessile, in pairs at leaf axils, small, to 1 cm (0.5 in) in diameter.

Ecological Significance: Introduced for ornament before 1912 (Fairchild 1938), and popular as a street tree in south Florida for decades. Began spreading by seed in the 1970s, following apparently accidental introduction of species-specific pollinating wasps (McKey and Kaufmann 1991, Nadel et al. 1992), probably via importation of plants from Hawaii, where wasps were successfully introduced in 1921 (Stange and Knight 1987). By 1980s, seedlings seen naturalized on both the west and east coasts of south Florida (Nadel et al. 1992). Found in Big Cypress National Preserve as seedlings on palm tree trunks, limestone rocks, and in building crevices (T. Pernas, National Park Service, 1995 pers. comm.). Also

found in various tropical hammocks (S. V. Wells, Miami-Dade Parks Department, 1995 pers. comm.).

Distribution: Native to Asia, but widely planted in the tropics (Little and Wadsworth 1964). Perhaps naturalized in Bermuda, where the pollinating wasp has also been found (Stange and Knight 1987). In Florida, documented as invading coastal strands, lakes, floodplain swamps, rockland hammocks, and ruderal communities. Documented by herbarium specimens in Hillsborough, Highlands, Charlotte, Lee, Collier, Martin, Palm Beach, Broward, and Miami-Dade counties (Wunderlin and Hansen 2004). May presently be naturalized throughout its cultivated range in Florida (Nadel et al. 1992).

Life History: Fast-growing, able to survive in little or no soil when young; seedlings and saplings found in rain gutters, building crevices, sidewalk cracks, and on rocks, as well as in “boots” of sabal palm trunks. Found on high-rise buildings in Singapore (Wee 1992). Has a complex mode of sexual reproduction requiring pollination by specific tiny wasps that in turn use the shelter and food of the specific fig to carry out their life cycle (a mutualistic relationship). Seeds dispersed primarily by birds and other vertebrates, with evidence of further dispersal by ants (Kaufmann et al. 1991). Unlikely to naturalize and persist above the frost line in Florida (H. Gramling, Tampa Bay Wholesale Growers, 1998 pers. comm.).